

## Defending the church's truth claims

### 17. Can we begin to put the matter of Jesus another way?

What does this thing wish to be? vision hypothesis mystery

This piece is strictly for those who 'would not want to put it quite like that now'.

At this point we are very much into DIY and these are early days; here are some off-cuts to think about.

I have met a number of church-goers who have been puzzling away by themselves at how they can understand and speak about their experience of the Jesus phenomenon. Usually they keep quiet about it for they are uncertain how far the answers which they have found are really Christian. I am convinced that now is the time for us to start talking to each other. I believe that we can help each other by talking these things through together out loud. My guess is that, if people in churches could start talking with each other about these matters without constraint, we might be surprised at how many clerical persons took heart from our debate.

How to approach those outside while we ourselves are in the process of discovering?

The evolutionary apparatus. I think that it may be helpful to begin by looking again at how the human apparatus works. Sometimes we know exactly when something 'dawned on us', but perhaps more often, looking back, it is very hard to say when an idea first entered our consciousness. The idea has lain dormant for so long, or has been mulled over so often, that we simply don't know when it became part of us - part of the way we look at life. We find to our surprise that the idea has somehow wormed its way into our consciousness. It seems to me that Jesus is perfectly capable of worming his way into our consciousness. And then there is our curiosity. I guess that it is part of our nature to be curious. Humankind would not be where it is today if it were not part of its make-up to be curious.

'Trajectory'. How can we sensibly imagine that God goes about dealing with such a creature as we are? It seems that some He overwhelms on a Damascus Road and they are born again; but apparently he does not treat everyone in the same way. Perhaps we have a clue in the way Jesus seems to have taught his first followers. It is well known that he taught in what we call 'parables'. That word has in it the Greek root (ballo) meaning 'I throw'. If I throw 'para' I throw alongside, or throw past, usually with the connotation that I am throwing from a distance. Starting from this point Erik Routley developed an insight into how God might deal with us in his book *\*Into a Far Country\**, published by Independent Press Ltd in 1962. His suggestion is that the word 'parable' "introduces a fundamental idea of communication which can be conveniently summed up in the word 'trajectory'..... 'Trajectory' is, for the purposes of our argument here, the path described by the

Word of God (to use an anthropomorphic approximation) between its leaving its source and its fruitfully lodging in the mind and heart of the believer." p. 23. If a ball is thrown to one side of me, or past me, I have to reach out to catch it. Given that I have the curiosity to want to catch the 'ball', and succeed in catching it, it becomes lodged in my mind and can start to worm its way into my consciousness.

In defence of small packets. I am interested in what, if anything, might be achieved by tossing about a very meagre little packet of doctrine indeed. I am convinced that the fact that we may not be able to posit much about the underlying reality does not diminish it. Words are a well-recognised weapon of mastery in our struggle to feel at ease in the universe. The cut-and-driedness of the creeds is, at it seems to me, one of the disadvantages we have had to put up with because we have demanded certainty, where, perhaps, certainty is not, as we now understand matters, actually available.

Could tossing a packet amount to mission? It seems that, if only we can arouse curiosity, ('how very intriguing') a meagre little packet of 'doctrine' may be caught by a listener; but that a meagre little packet may yet prove to be just enough. Once he or she has caught it, the growth, or failure to grow, of 'faith', if that is the right word to use, is not up to us. Who knows, his few remaining friends may be saying to each other years later, "he seems to have had a change of heart"? or her friends, "she's not the person she was".

Fishing for particular species. Though the principle of trajectory may be of general application, we need not suppose that every lay person is expected to trawl generally for fishes. I guess that we may be required to talk about these matters to those with whom we daily talk about other matters as occasion arises. Once again we are left with DIY. Often, it seems to me, you just have to float out matter which can be understood at different levels and see what is played back to you.

Raising questions in conversation. We all have a number of questions on which we would welcome a fresh insight from any source. Asking a question would seem to be neither condescending, nor particularly threatening. I have sometimes raised an evolutionary variation on an old question (which so troubles Christians) about 'the Problem of Good', "Where does all the 'good' come from in a universe cooling from hot hot hot?" Perhaps my genes have programmed me to be nicer to my children than to my nephews and nieces, and nicer to them than to second cousins once removed, etc., etc., etc.; but that answer bears very little relation to my experience. And then there are twinges of conscience, are they convincingly explicable on the basis of social convention in a neutral universe? This sort of question may not be the best ice-breaker on first being introduced, but a conversation sometimes arrives at a different level surprisingly quickly.

What next? If we recognise together the possibility that there is a something beyond, even an underlying reality; might the the Jesus phenomenon be in some sort of relationship with it? Suppose, then, that there is an underlying reality and that Jesus may have been in some relationship with it. Paul, brought up in a tradition which understood its history in terms of a Something powerful for Good

with whom his ancestors had been in a long and stormy relationship, was able to formulate his faith in terms of his fathers' God. We no longer stand securely in that Jewish tradition, but we could ourselves follow and encourage others to follow Paul's example and try to formulate an understanding of the relationship between this Something powerful for Good and Jesus in accordance with our contemporary understanding of the nature of the universe. Of course, we would not wish to ignore such of the insights of the Jewish people and of Christians of earlier generations as we are aware of and seemed still to be useful.

A hypothesis for testing. What has become of Christian confidence? We have locked the old God- authored certainties in the safe in the church vestry. It is hardly to be expected that we can produce a full-grown substitute out of our conjuror's hat, and who would believe our magic if we did? But we have to start somewhere. We still have to say something about Jesus, perhaps this afternoon. I propose the working hypothesis that there is a Something powerful for Good in the universe. On most days it is a hope; on bad days it seems hopeless; at good moments it amounts to a conviction. My hypothesis is that this Something is not directly perceptible to a human being's evolutionary apparatus (see Parts 3 and 18) and that Jesus is probably the best clue we have to it. If that rather pathetic scrap of doctrine were once 'caught', it would, I trust, be capable, in appropriate circumstances, of holding someone still before Jesus. If it contrived to do that, even for a moment, it would have done its job.

An alternative hypothesis for testing. If you feel able, with Paul, to speak of 'victory', you can put it this way:

'Goodness is stronger than evil;

love is stronger than hate;

light is stronger than darkness;

life is stronger than death;

victory is ours through Him who loved us.'

Not one of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's reckless assertions is obviously true as you look around you. You can choose to live by them, or you can decide not to; they are matters of faith.

If we did decide to live by them, every decision we had to take afterwards might turn, not on 'what's in it for me?', but on 'what can I do to help?' In time that might make a difference. But, if it did, I am at present less confident than Desmond Tutu that we should ever know - even with regard to ourselves. May be we get our pay cheque in an after life; but perhaps we don't. If we find ourselves unable to believe that God is the author of the scriptures, the comfort of the human selection of passages from them which have long been understood to guarantee our salvation, is gone. It seems to me that followers of Jesus may in future have to make do with a

lot less certainty than many church people believe they deserve. We may have to accept that we do not know, and are not going to know, the broad picture, the old familiar Salvation History and all that, let alone the detail.

My miserable little hypothesis is not a comfortable hypothesis any more than the atheist's hypothesis appears to be comfortable to live with. These are not comfortable times in which to be living. The hypothesis which I have proposed is one which leaves a distinctly uncomfortable amount up to the individual conscience. The only comfort seems to be the comfort to be had from knowing that you tried your best to do what you believed to be your duty, and the curious conviction that followers often have that we are somehow not alone. Your sense of duty may have been influenced by and even determined by your understanding of Jesus; but that does not approximate to a cast-iron guarantee of salvation. The discomfort of not believing that God is the author of the scriptures includes the discomfiting possibility that the atheists may be right and we may be wrong. It is my conviction that church people have got things wrong before, and I must assume that we are equally capable of getting things wrong now once again. On my hypothesis we just have to trust.

The choice of hypothesis - alias the leap of faith - is there for everyone to make.

Perhaps out of a bare hypothesis a relationship may grow. Suppose that the hypothesis, the credo, is no more than 'I believe that there is a Something powerful for Good in the universe and that Jesus is the best clue we have to it', or the even more cautious double negative, 'I do not believe that in Jesus we are deceived'; we shall, I suppose, eventually need a theology; but first we might want to go back and, for example, read a whole gospel consecutively from start to finish. Who knows? that might be the start of a relationship with Jesus; many say that they have found it to be so.

Theology. I suspect that we may be able to get by at the beginning with a pretty small dose of theology. Most of the delightful, thoughtful, dedicated, effective, forceful Christians I know get along already without much theology any way. If we start by spending a bit more time reading and re-reading what the witnesses in the New Testament had to say and trying to keep still before Jesus, we may at the end of a long life be able to put a little theological flesh on the bare hypothesis; but perhaps we won't. Perhaps it will remain a mystery and we shall be content.

Doubt. My guess is that the emphasis in future may have to be, not so much on Christian certainty, as on Christian trust at best, perhaps on no more than Christian hope that God has not stopped work. Doubt has, I suppose, always been about, though the Christian ideal is steadfast faith. I was much relieved when I came across some words Robert Browning put in the mouth of his Bishop Blougram in the poem 'Bishop Blougram's Apology' many years ago.

"All we have gained then by our unbelief

Is a life of doubt diversified by faith,

For one of faith diversified by doubt:

We called the chess-board white, - we call it black."

This open recognition that doubt is endemic took some of the pressure off.

I hope we can share something of what it is like to be alive on good believing days. The moments of conviction that we are up against something sort of permanent here; that we are in touch with something permanent, something that keeps faith - something not really so much thingy as personlike - "do not fear, for I am with you"; "underneath are the everlasting arms" - a few intimations along those lines, shared with Jews and, I suspect, with Muslims; anthropomorphic, if you will; vividly anthropomorphic; but a picture sometimes helps.

It would almost certainly help if the new theologians could one day find a way to tell the truth in the form of a story. I do not know what should go into that story. I guess that our present uncertainties may not be susceptible of being put in that illuminating form. But perhaps you have an idea?

What sort of Christianity is this? My hypothesis will not be recognised as Christian by many Christians of whom I am fond and whom I greatly respect. But, perhaps, sheltering in a good cause behind Peter and Paul in their search for an understanding of their experience, it may not be too hurtful to be denied the name 'Christian'; which was not used in the beginning, but coined later on - in Syrian Antioch of all places, they say.

I doubt we can do without the Old Testament. Surely, it was his understanding of the Old Testament that prepared Jesus to set out into the desert to be baptised by John, and underpinned his understanding of his experience throughout his life? We can hardly expect to understand the meaning, the significance, of him, if we do not try to understand it.

'Man come of age'? It seems to me that an insight of the prophet Ezekiel may be helpful to people who feel that they have come of age. In the first chapter of the book which bears his name Ezekiel tells us of a terrifying experience. After a series of mildly frightening happenings it suddenly dawned on him that God was about, that (as the Revised Version expresses it) "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord." And he remembers his response: "And when I saw it I fell upon my face"; and he remembers to this day what happened next: "And I heard a voice of one that spake. And he said unto me, Son of Man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee. And the spirit entered into me when he spake unto me, and set me upon my feet, that I heard him that spake unto me". Falling on one's face on becoming aware that one is in the presence of the not-directly-known is out of fashion among Christians in the West. My guess is that it remains the initial response most natural to a human being. "Son of Man, stand upon thy feet" - I think that, if we hear the voice nowadays, we may get the impression that it is saying something like this to us: "get up off your backside, you, and pay attention;

put all your intelligence, all your imagination, all your energy and all your passion on the alert, and I'll talk with you."

But then again we might hear no more, and no less, than the prophet Micah: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6. 8 NRSV). Who knows?

And from the New Testament? I think that Jesus probably once said (in Aramaic) (and no one who heard him ever forgot) "Who do you say I am?"